

VZCZCXRO8181
PP RUEHAG
DE RUEHCV #1635/01 1561621
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 051621Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4885
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6581
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5528
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2068
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0309
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2148
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3812
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0739
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1265
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3568
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1260
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0226
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0850
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0259
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 3214
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0760

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 001635

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FOR FRC LAMBERT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2026

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY IN GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

REF: 05 CARACAS 01283

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez continues to nominate military personnel to serve in the most senior elected and appointed positions of his administration. Although we lack precise numbers, Embassy contacts and research suggest the military's presence in civilian government continues to grow. Through its various non-traditional duties, the military plays a highly visible role in Venezuelan society. For example, military participation in social missions, law enforcement, and elections is prominent. Civilian Chavistas tend to act more "martial" than the soldiers themselves, according to political science professors. Opportunities for promotion and illicit enrichment afforded soldiers in government appear to be generating some resentment in the ranks. The BRV is a military regime with socialist rhetoric. Although the world's radical left portrays it as a communal paradise, Venezuela looks more like the preserve of a right-wing Latin American junta. End Summary.

Soldiers in Government

12. (U) Active duty and retired military officers are omnipresent in President Hugo Chavez' administration and civil service. The most important military official in the Government is the President. The new Organic Law of the National Armed Forces (LOFAN) establishes that the President

has the "military rank" of commander-in-chief. Chavez, a former army lieutenant colonel, occasionally appears in uniform to address his troops. Nine of Venezuela's 23 governors and six of its 25 cabinet ministers are ex-soldiers. Active duty and retired officers also have a strong presence in executive ministries, parastatal companies, diplomatic missions abroad, and some state governments (see annex paragraph 11 for a partial list).

13. (U) Over half of the military personnel nominated to serve in the public sector in 2006 hail from the Venezuelan Army. Dozens attended the military academy during Chavez' time there as a student and teacher. Some have ties to Chavez' attempted coup. Almost all soldiers in government are officers, ranging from lieutenant to three "sun" admiral Defense Minister Orlando Maniglia. (See REFTEL for a more detailed breakdown of these soldiers.)

14. (C) Post lacks exact data on the number of soldiers in civilian government positions, but Embassy contacts and research indicate that the military's presence may be growing. Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) political science Professor Ricardo Sucre Heredia told poloff May 9 that as of 2003, 166 soldiers held civilian government posts. He said that his conversations with contacts led him to suspect that that number had since increased. To be sure, he asserted, one would have to sift through hundreds of BRV official gazettes. A DAO review of official gazettes and press reports also suggests the number has grown. Chavez has seconded roughly 60-100 officers to civilian positions each year since 2000. However, as the documents report nominations but not attrition, we cannot simply add up the soldiers currently in government. That said, it is safe to say that there are several hundred military personnel, active and retired, serving in civilian BRV positions today.

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15. (C) Chavez' management style also tends to increase the number of military officials in government. The President trusts his former military colleagues to manage senior civilian positions. By placing them in positions with opportunities for illicit enrichment, Chavez rewards his officers and keeps them beholden to him. Whether they are corrupt or not, officers in these posts draw both civilian and military salaries. According to DAO reporting, Chavez has made civilian government stints even more popular by having military rules weigh them more heavily in promotion considerations.

Military Presence Throughout Society

16. (U) In addition to holding official government positions, soldiers figure prominently in the state's ever-expanding role in Venezuelan society. The military's mission statement in the LOFAN includes "active participation in national development." As such, many of Chavez' social missions showcase the military. (See SEPTTEL on the military reserves' role in development.) Additional unconventional military duties abound. For instance, law enforcement has always been the National Guard's most prominent mission. Through "Plan Republica," the military safeguards voting receipts and provides security and crowd control during Venezuela's frequent elections. State governments and the National Land Institute use the armed forces to occupy rural land in "interventions" aimed at intimidating property owners.

Military Views on Civilian Responsibilities

17. (C) Soldiers' differences of opinion about their involvement in politics are slowly becoming apparent. The

Venezuelan Army submitted a report to the National Assembly that mentioned the excessive nomination of personnel to government ministries as a drain on its human resources in 2005. Resentment about the military's new roles also festers unexpressed among active duty personnel. According to DAO, officers become embittered when those lacking command experience are promoted ahead of them. In addition, some officers resent being left off of the civilian government gravy train ridden by their superiors, active duty and retired officers tell us. They add that the jealousy has led to back-stabbing within the services. Retired officers add that military officers resent civilian duties as a matter of pride. (Note: This latter view may be peculiar to the retired old guard, who have had less experience with the military's social responsibilities. New recruits are well aware their careers will have a large development component.)

Why Make Money in the Civilian Government?

18. (C) Of course, opportunities for corruption in traditional military positions abound. As BRV military spending has increased, military contracts have grown in number and in size. As contracts have expanded, so have kickbacks. Still, for those soldiers stuck in less lucrative military jobs, the civilian public sector offers almost inexhaustible possibilities for illicit gain. Contracts are not the only source of corruption. Retired officers head ministries that have budgets but are obviously not doing much spending, such as the Tourism and Infrastructure Ministries. Such circumstances beg the question whether money is stolen

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directly without resorting to bribes. Military personnel involved in the MERCAL mission, for instance, have stolen subsidized food and have sold it for profit. Similarly, involvement in the public banking and oil sectors affords military officials access to significant off-budget funds. Military encroachment in law enforcement (former army lieutenant Jesse Chacon is Interior Minister) presents new opportunities for shakedowns.

Saluting Chavista Civilians

19. (U) During a May 9 conference hosted by the UCV political science department, several anti-Chavez professors argued that civilian supporters of the President were adopting military characteristics. According to Professor Domingo Irwin, the militaristic character of civilian government officials was not a new phenomenon; rather, it dated back to 18th century Venezuela. Professors Ricardo Sucre Heredia and Fernando Falcon--the latter a participant in Chavez' failed coup in 1992--held that Chavistas acted more "military" than the soldiers themselves. Pro-Chavez marches employing uniformed soldiers alongside civilians dressed in matching red attire reinforce the militaristic stereotype of the servants of the revolution.

Comment

10. (S) If a public sector filled with soldiers and "soldierly civilians" does not begin to militarize society, we are not sure what does. Although the armed forces' role in development gives militarization a distinctively Chavista flair, the BRV shares commonalities with the nationalist, right-wing military governments of Latin American history. This martial character of the BRV has gone largely unnoticed by the world's radical left. Ironically, Chavez has even hosted American anti-war activists to protest the "militarization" of the United States. Hugo Chavez has shown he is hypersensitive to criticism from the left and attempts

to compare him with the right. Psyops planners, then, could find much potential in drawing the left's attention to Chavez' old-style military rule.

Annex: Soldiers in Important Civilian Government Positions

¶11. (U) GOVERNORS

Apure Governor Jesus Aguilarte
Bolívar Governor Francisco Rangel Gomez
Carabobo Governor Luis Felipe Acosta Carles
Cojedes Governor Johnny Yanez Rangel
Lara Governor Luis Reyes Reyes
Merida Governor Francisco Porras
Miranda Governor Diosdado Cabello
Tachira Governor Ronald Blanco La Cruz
Vargas Governor Antonio Rodriguez

MINISTERS

Minister of Agriculture and Land Elias Jaua
Minister of Defense Orlando Maniglia
Minister of Infrastructure Ramon Carrizalez Rengifo

Minister of Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon
Minister of Social Development and Popular
Participation Jorge Luis Garcia Carneiro

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Minister of Tourism Wilmar Castro

MISCELLANEOUS

Permanent Representative to the US
Francisco Javier Arias Cardenas
Terrorism Czar Jesus Villegas Solarte

WHITAKER